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Company, attorney general agree on plans to fix smelly Bridgeton landfill

St. Louis Post-Dispatch – 5/15/13

5 hours ago • By Blythe Bernhard and Jeffrey Tomich

Republic Services Inc. will place a plastic cap on its Bridgeton landfill by early September to control foul odors and extinguish an underground fire, Missouri Attorney General Chris Koster announced Tuesday.

Capping the landfill is part of an agreement between Koster and Republic filed Monday in St. Louis County Circuit Court. The attorney general sued Republic on March 27, alleging violations of state environmental laws.

Koster said his office would “aggressively” track the company’s compliance.

The work is expected to temporarily worsen the stench from the landfill fire, and Republic has agreed to provide hotels for nearby residents for the next month. Parents of children in nearby Pattonville High and Rose Acres elementary schools complained that the work will start during the last week of classes and field day activities. But Koster said the project should not be delayed.

“We sympathize, as anyone would, with the situation of students who are in their last days of classes,” Koster said. “But there is no one — not a single expert involved in the decision-making process — who believes we should wait to proceed.”

Residents and environmental groups have expressed concerns about the fire’s proximity to radioactive materials stored at nearby West Lake Landfill. Koster called the possibility of fire reaching West Lake remote and a worst-case scenario. Emergency plans include building a barrier between the two landfills with help from the Environmental Protection Agency if the fire moves closer.

Joseph Bindbeutel, an assistant attorney general, said the fire was considered contained at 1,200 feet from West Lake about three weeks ago but that the situation is changing rapidly. He did not elaborate.

Koster said he was not pessimistic about the West Lake situation, but he was not optimistic either. He said the situation will require increased attention from the state.

Under the agreement, Republic Services can be fined up to \$10,000 a day if requirements for monitoring and containing the odors are not met on time. The agreement

does not settle the lawsuit, which is intended to address long-term environmental impacts, Koster said.

A plastic cap covering part of the landfill known as the south quarry is scheduled to be in place by early September, Koster said. Before the cap can be placed, the company must remove unstable concrete pipes that could sink and allow in oxygen to stoke the fire. This excavation work is expected to make the odors worse.

“It is important to know that this critical work has to be completed to control the odors long term,” said Tim Trost of Republic Services in a prepared statement. Trost said the company has spent more than \$20 million on efforts to collect the gases being released by the smoldering waste.

Koster said there will be increased police patrols in the surrounding neighborhoods where residents can choose to evacuate, including the Spanish Village subdivision, the Terrisan Reste mobile home park and some condominium buildings at Carrollton Village. Residents within a mile radius of the landfill are eligible for the free hotel stays from May 19 to June 14.

The relocation plan is more about the nuisance odors than any additional health risks, Koster said. The state health department has said the fumes can irritate sinus passages and exacerbate symptoms of asthma and other respiratory illnesses.

Nearby workers have said they also have to endure the stench. Tony Gilard spends nine to 10 hours a day working at Hussmann Refrigeration, just across St. Charles Rock Road from the landfill.

“Just about every day we get this nasty noxious smell out there, and when it rains it’s really bad,” Gilard said. “It just reeks in the building.”

State health officials said levels of sulfur dioxide exceeded health guidelines for short-term exposures in air samples taken from March 16 to April 23. Sulfur dioxide at those levels can cause coughing and irritate eyes and nasal passages. Earlier air monitoring also indicated similar health risks from high levels of hydrogen sulfide and benzene, a carcinogen. Measurements of radioactivity and carbon monoxide have not reached levels of concern, according to the state Department of Natural Resources.

The Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District earlier this year ordered the landfill to stop discharging leachate — liquid runoff — into the sewer system because the runoff contained excessive levels of benzene.

The district recently agreed to temporarily allow some leachate to again be discharged into the sewer, with the rest sent by truck to two other MSD plants. The agreement is conditioned on the landfill operators installing treatment equipment on site, MSD spokesman Lance LeComb said.

“It’s not something we’re going to allow to go on indefinitely,” he said.

Beth Strohmeyer, who lives in Maryland Heights about 1.5 miles from the landfill, said she and other residents want better information about the fire and its proximity to the radioactive waste.

“If the stench wouldn’t have been there, we wouldn’t have found out about the underground fire,” Strohmeyer said. “We have a way bigger elephant in the corner. We want the stuff removed, and we want the fire to stop, and we want to know what we’re breathing.”

The agreement

Missouri Attorney General Chris Koster and Republic Services, owners of the Bridgeton landfill, filed an agreement Monday on plans to extinguish an underground fire causing odors in the area.

- On May 20, Republic Services will start removing concrete pipes that threaten to allow oxygen to reach the smoldering waste.
- Republic must pay for daily air quality monitoring.
- The fire must be contained so it doesn't spread toward the radioactive waste at nearby West Lake Landfill.
- Residents in a one-mile radius can stay at hotels from May 19 to June 14 at Republic's expense.
- Leachate run-off must be tested for toxins and disposed of properly by Republic.
- A permanent cap is expected to be in place by September.